

# "HOLY LOVE" vs. "ALIENATION OF AFFECTION"

On the phone today, a wistful nonbeliever said "I'm puzzled at the gap between what most people say is important & what they actually treat as important, & I've concluded that the problem is the absence of awe about what they say is important." I quoted him what more than a half-century ago I'd read in THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES....

....but before I give you the quote, I want to relate it to "Where were you when you heard that Kennedy had been shot?" We can remember where we were when we heard/read something that hit us hard enough, impressed us enough, to impress (lit., press in on us) a place-memory strong enough for lifelong access.

The quote: "*The function of the sacred [ & its praxis, viz. religion] is to render impressive what is important.*" This lifelong secularist has been, till now, certain that religion is unimportant & therefore irrelevant to "humanism," which (ironically) has been his religion. Long pause on the phone, then this: "I'm going to make a banner of those words & put it up where I'll see it every day. What can I do--for myself & others--to connect, with the important, the experience of awe?" When I suggested he try worship in a particular high-liturgy church, he said "No freedom there, it would be only form, rigid form," I said "The freedom is when you leave." He chuckled, "I think I see what you mean, but isn't there a shorter way to the kind of freedom of thought you have?" I: "None I know of; this kind of freedom comes from long discipline to orderly thinking." He: "Yes, I see order & freedom balanced in you." Whereupon another lifelong-available quote came to mind: "Perfect liberty is perfect obedience to the perfect law" (which I read, age 12, in Fosdick's TWELVE TESTS OF CHARACTER). Oh yes, where did I read the social-sciences encyclopedia quote? The library of NY's Union Theological Seminary. (The underlining is mine.)

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The above conversation, which continued with my relating the gospel to his concern, brought to mind a historical marker (in Natick, Mass.) I saw for the first time a few days ago in front of a church: "John Eliot helped his Indian converts build this first meetinghouse, 1651." Soon enough Indians had **reordered their priorities** enough to form twenty "praying towns." Sin, from one angle, is the baleful human condition of disordered priorities.

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Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" is, from one angle, a sermon-drama about disordered priorities. Returning from her grave to her age-12 home, Emily becomes distraught over her parent's idolatry of the unimportant, and moans "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it--every, every minute?" (The Stage Manager--on B'way., currently rave-reviewed Paul Newman (THE NEW YORKER, 12.16.02), a deus ex machina, "the Author of Authors, the Big Guy himself"--replies "Saints and poets maybe.") With her post-mortem eyes, Emily sadly says "So *all* that was going on, and we never noticed!" Wilder's comment: "You never teach anyone anything. You merely recall things to them," things "sleeping just below the level of consciousness." Wilder had faith that that "below," surfaced, would arrange life according to a cosmic order of importances--the faith behind his 1927 novel THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY--the faith specifically Christian in his brother Amos & in their Congregational ancestors, most dramatically in Jon. Edwards' doctrine of "holy love" as the proper proportionality of the "affections."

Ironically, in "Our Town" it's the ghost of the drunk church-organist suicide who says to Emily, who's returned to her grave, "Now you know; that's what it was to be alive. To always be at the mercy of one self-centered passion or another.... Ignorance and blindness!" By disordered priorities, to miss the holy in the common, the extraordinary in the ordinary. Comments the Stage Manager, "We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even stars--everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings."

Against his longtime good friend Chas. Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace argued that reality, the universe, the world, is teleological, goal-oriented (biblically, "Thy kingdom come...."). In a letter to an ill friend, Wilder put it this way: "All Nature

strives to bring every detail to its truest expression of its function. All Nature is working *for* you. Rise above immediate things and feel that--get a-hold of that. Float in the teleological tide." Comments Jn.Lahr, the NEW YORKER reviewer, the play "leaves us with a sense of blessing, and the unspoken but palpable command to achieve gratitude in what remains of our days on earth."

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This Thinksheet tries to diagnose the illness of the mainline churches, & concludes that it's partly schizophrenia ( a splitting off of the mind from reality) but mainly **schizopatheia**, the splitting off of the feelings/emotions/affections from reality (i.e., how things are in God, in the universe, in life). The Greeks, as you might guess, had a dozen expressions for this malady. But I must hasten on to the cure for this "alienation of affection" (to use a legal term for which Google, in .32 seconds, gave me 2,700 sites, defining it as "willful and malicious interference with marriage relations by a third party"). In the drama of Gn.3, the third party is the snake, which Talmud takes to be "yetzer ra'," the evil tendency in every human being. That forbidden fruit was beautiful (beware of beauty!) & nutritious (beware of usefulness!). YHWH is Israel's wife, & Jesus is the Church's bride: saints, beware of adultery & fornication (i.e., love's intensity migrating from the committed beloved)!

1 Seventy-some years ago, my judge-father used to rehearse to the family the details of "alienation of affection" cases, all based on third-party culpability for having victimized the plaintiff by seducing the plaintiff's spouse. These laws (now repealed in the U.S. except in nine states) saw the plaintiff as the secondary victim, the primary victim being the seduced, who could file the devil-made-me-do-it plea (the devil, here, being the seducer). The culture shifted: now the blame (moral, not legal) is on the seduced, who should have resisted the seduction.

The application is obvious: when we have "coldness of heart" toward God & "wanderings of mind" from him, our schizopatheia ~~is~~ is our own fault. Says God (Is. 29.13 TEV), "These people claim to worship me, but...their hearts are somewhere else" (quoted in Mt.15.8; M.7.6). Because where the heart (Heb."lev," inner life) is, there is passion, which is power, the church is impotent to the extent that its members' passion centers elsewhere than on God, **the love of God**: "they will hold to the outward form of our religion, but reject its real power" (2Tim.3.5; in metaphor, "they are like clouds carried along by the wind, but bringing no rain" [Jude 12]).

2 Advances in social psychology/pathology have increased the value & power of analogizing to spiritual schizopatheia. In a trenchant 1.7.03 WSJ piece, Jas.Q.Wilson lists the social pathologies attributable to the wanderings-of-mind away from family as the earthly passion center of human life. While he rightly praises women's liberation for expanding women's opportunities, he sees the movement as weakening society's fundamental institution by alienating women's affections from (& to some extent even demeaning) woman's family-role. A parallel movement has been male declining interest in the family. "Families were created to make up for what evolution did not provide, namely, a way by which men could be induced to support the children they beget and care for the women they impregnate." As a social construct, the family is fragile; a manless "family" is less able to help boys become men, so society is afflicted with millions of males who are mature only in body. The absentee-male phenomenon (I add) result in society's hyperfeminization in home, school, church, & potentially also in business & politics (the % of males in higher education steadily declining).

Again the application is obvious: affectional alienation from family/father parallels affectional alienation from church/Father ("Our Father...in heaven"). Lesser loves have taken the centrally-privileged affectional position which Scripture and the Faith accord to "**holy love**," the God-initiated affection between deity and humanity--as it is expressed in the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, "He [God] seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin." That "He," which is not in the versions of the Statement, signals a mainline-church problem in reviving holy love, viz. the widespread clergy-alienation from our religion's canonical-classical language for God (viz. all pronouns & all personal titles, masculine).: family pathology on earth has been projected up into the heavens.